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AUTHOR Hutchinson, Sue; Hamilton, David
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ABSTRACT

In 1990, a task force invited the Liverpool University (England) Department of Education to provide organizational support for a new nursery. The nursery had two goals: to provide child care for unemployed parents and to provide training for parents who wished to obtain employment as child caregivers. The first phase of the university's support involved clarifying the current circumstances of preschool education in Great Britain. Eight forces were identified as influencing preschool education: (1) a restructured labor market, in which the number of women workers has increased significantly; (2) a lowered age of entry into school; (3) an increase in the number of employer-supported creches; (4) the growth of workplace vocational training; (5) Labor Party commitment to nursery education; (6) constraints imposed by the Children Act of 1989; (7) the integration of previously separate day care and educational programs; and (8) effects of the National Curriculum on nurseries. The proposed nursery has not been created because financial uncertainty has jeopardized the future of the agency that originally approached the task force to propose the nursery. (BC)

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The New Wave Nursery[1]

Sue Hutchinson & David Hamilton
Department of Education
University of Liverpool
Liverpool L69 3BX

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Pre-school educational provision is in a state of flux. It has a long history[2], dating back at least as far as the eighteenth century. But pre-school education has never remained a static institution. Like all educational provision, it is responsive to its historical circumstances.

In 1990, Granby-Toxteth Inner City Task Force invited the support of Liverpool University Department of Education. They hoped we could provide intellectual and organisational support for a new nursery to be created within a local (private) training agency. The proposed nursery had two goals. First, to provide childcare for long-term unemployed parents who wished to enter the labour market. And secondly, to provide training and accreditation for those parents who specificallly wished to obtain employment as child carers.

Task Force support enabled the University to appoint Sue

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[1]Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, Nottingham Polytechnic, August 28-31, 1991.

[2]See for instance N. Whitbread, The Evolution of the Nursery-Infant School 1800-1970, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.

DH\WP51\nursery

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Hutchinson, a part-time development worker for twelve months from May 1991 and it also allowed for the limited release of David Hamilton.

The first phase of our work has been to clarify the current circumstances of pre-schooling in Britain. At the outset we fully appreciated that they differed from the circumstances of the last wave of interest documented for 1970s Liverpool by Eric Midwinter.[3]

Why, then, have we chosen the term 'new wave'? In 1971, just over 20% of three and four-year-olds received pre-schooling, and most of these were four-year-olds in reception classes. A year later, the White Paper Education: a Framework for Expansion (1972) proposed that, within ten years, nursery education should become available without charge. This goal was never achieved. Only 41% of three and four-year-olds were in nurseries in 1986, compared with the target of 70% to be met by 1982. Failure occured because, ultimately, no legislative pressure was placed upon LEAs to extend their provision. Nursery education remained a discretionary service. For instance, only nine out of 107 LEAs in 1986 had nursery places for more than 20% of their under fives.[4]

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[3]Priority Education: an Account of the Liverpool Project, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

[4]C. Owen & P. Moss, 'Patterns of pre-school provision in English local authorities', Jornal of Education Policy, 1989, 4, No. 4, 309-328.

DH\WP51\nursery

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In our view, at least eight different forces are currently shaping the new wave:

1. A restructuring of the labour market under the influence of demographic, economic and domestic circumstances.

> It is predicted that the number of school-leavers will fall by almost a million (i.e. 30%) by 1995. Between 1971 and 1987 the labour force in the UK increased by 2.3 million; almost all of this increase was made up of women workers. At present about 40% of the labour force is female, with the possibility of further increases. Recent surveys by the Equal Opportunities Commission have suggested that as many as one million more women would work if offered suitable childcare facilities.

2. Differences in the educational biographies of children entering maintained infant schools.

> Children are being admitted to school at too early an age. This causes stress, leading to calls for infant classrooms to take more account of the educational needs of the under fives (e.g with respect to staffing, class sizes and equipment).

3. The emergence of 'company creches' created by employers worried about the retention of women workers.

> The Midland Bank is planning to open a network of company creches by 1995, while other companies are already offering childcare vouchers. But, given the recession, companies may not be able to maintain their own nurseries, swithing to the support of outside private provision. The National Childcare Directory (August, 1991)[5] reports a significant growth in workplace nurseries in the previous twelve months. 55% of this increase was in higher education, LEAs and hospitals.

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[5] Times Educational Supplement, 9th August, 1991.

4. The growth of workplace vocational training.

Training for nursery nurses is changing from a two-year college-based course to workplace training based upon the acquisition of graded National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

5. Labour Party commitment to the provision of nursery education.

Although, the labour Party has a policy of increasing the provision of child care, it is not clear whether this relates to the creation of a comprehensive state-run and state-funded service or merely to a mixed economy with a range of subsidies to private nurseries. [It seems, too, that conservative ministers are considering extending personal tax-relief on childcare.]

6. Constraints imposed by the Children Act (1989).

The Act requires: (1) local authority registration and inspection - a strengthening of earlier legislation; (2) a reduction in care ratios; and (3) attention to childrens' religions, racial origins and mother tongues.

7. Integration, coordination and improvement of previously separate daycare and educational provision.

The Children Act (1989) also requires Local Authorities to coordinate current services. Further, the Rumbold Report (1990)[6] argues that 'there is a need made the more urgent by the rapid pace of current change and development within the education system to raise the quality of a good deal of existing provision' (para. 8).

8. The backwash effect of the National Curriculum.

Recent research has highlighted differences between day nurseries and nursery classes in primary schools. Nursery teachers in primary schools have had their awareness about preschool curriculum matters raised by the National Curriculum, its tasks and stages. Staff in day nurseries,

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[6]Starting with Quality (Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Quality of the Educatinal Experience offered to 3- anad 4-year-olds chaired by Mrs Angela Rumbold CBE, MP), London: HMSO, 1990.

DH\WP51\nursery

however, reported that they would welcome training in childrens' emotional developments and in family support; that is, in areas outside the curriculum framework of the Education Reform Act (1988).[7]

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So much for the new wave. But how has it affected the Liverpool inner-city nursery? Hardly at all. The tide has run out on the training agency that originally approached the Granby-Toxteth Task Force. Its nursery has not been launched. Financial uncertainty has jeopardised the agency's future. Public funds channelled through the newly-founded local Training and Education Council (TEC) have been attentuated. Government policy now includes the market forces premise that many long-term unemployed persons do not need training; they merely need to make more effort in looking for work.[8]

The second-hand portable classrooms intended for the new nursery lie empty - beached, like our project, on the inner city shoreline. Meanwhile, we draw attention to the current circumstances and predicaments of inner-city provision. And with the help of the Granby-Toxteth Task Force, we seek another nursery to support....

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[7]Times Educational Supplement, 1st March, 1991.

[8]For evidence of the insolvency of private training agencies in the North West, see the Independent, 28th August, 1991.

DH\WP51\nursery